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Canavan, Brendan

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Exploring nuances in the domestic tourism niche: the case of a small island

Canavan, B.

University of Huddersfield, UK

Queensgate,

Huddersfield,

West Yorkshire,

HD1 3DH

B.Canavan@hud.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper presents a case concerning domestic tourism on the Isle of Man, British Isles. Qualitative interviews find existence of considerable domestic tourism activity conducted by island residents. This includes daytrips and overnight stays within the island. Such behaviour is identified by residents as touristic and distinct from other leisure activities. Particular activities and motivations associated with are recognisable as touristic, as a review of the relevant literature demonstrates. Yet recognition of domestic tourism in small geographic spaces is currently almost entirely absent. This article attempts to highlight the issue and draw attention to attendant benefits of domestic tourism, which include economic and social inputs. These may be relevant to a small island community, and in the case of the Isle of Man, help to support an otherwise ailing tourism industry.

Keywords: Island Tourism; Domestic Tourism; Tourism Impacts; Qualitative Research

1. INTRODUCTION

Niche tourism is frequently advocated in the tourism studies literature as a source of destination differentiation, rejuvenation and long-term sustainability (i.e. Scherrer *et al*, 2009). However, largely overlooked is the potential for the domestic tourism niche to thus contribute. In general domestic tourism is a subject area which tends to be neglected by the wider literature (Neto, 2003; Cortes-Jimenez, 2008). This oversight is compounded in the case of small islands. Such tourism faces the problem of falling outside of strict definitions of domestic tourism activity, whereby travel has to be above a certain distance to qualify, frequently greater than that which is possible in a confined geographic space (Canavan, 2013a). This is despite indirect evidence that island residents support many local tourism activities (Tsartas, 1992; Haralambopoulos and Pizam, 1996), and description of similarly scaled island-to-island tourism, where small island inhabitants are shown to pursue diverse tourism activities on a smaller island neighbour (Boissevain, 1979; Weaver, 1998). As Jaakson (1986) notes, escapism, relaxation, and proximity to nature underlie second home tourism, even when the second home may be within visual range of the first. Small scale does not mean tourism activity, and the motivations to undertake such activity, are non-existent (Canavan, 2013a).

Yet such understandings of nuances within domestic tourism are largely overlooked. Hence destination management and marketing strategies and recommendations outlined in the current literature, neglect a significant potential market. This paper aims to address such gaps in the literature, and therefore investigates domestic tourism in an underappreciated context; that of the small island.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although it may at times be considered as a niche for destination management and marketing purposes (i.e. Wilson, 1997), domestic tourism is itself large in scale and may thus somewhat bely niche definition. Research illustrates how domestic tourism accounts for upwards of four fifths of all tourism flows (Scheyvens, 2002). Even in nations with internationally orientated tourism industries domestic tourism is demonstrated to be greater in terms both of size and economic contribution (i.e. New Zealand; Pearce, 1990, Spain and Italy; Cortes-Jimenez, 2008, Italy; Massidda and Etzo (2012: 609). To illustrate, estimates put the value of the UK domestic tourism industry in 2009 at around £70bn, more than three times the size of international (VisitBritain.org).

A range of benefits have been specifically associated with domestic tourism that make the niche of interest to tourism practitioners. Domestic tourism is widely acknowledged for inducing a redistribution of national income, from richer typically metropolitan areas, to poorer usually rural and isolated ones (Archer, 1978, Pearce, 1990, Neto, 2003). Hence, domestic tourism can offer opportunities for wealth transfer to and sustainable development of secondary landscapes and attractions (Seckleemann, 2002). Peripheral islands tend to lack first-order attractions, yet they frequently have an abundance of high quality natural and cultural landscapes of interest to potential visitors.

Domestic tourists may additionally be more sensitive to local cultural and natural carrying capacities, due to cultural proximity, shared values and resources (Ryan, 2001). Carr (2002) suggests tourists may indulge in less hedonistic, and potentially problematic, behaviour, domestically than when abroad.

Travel by nationals within their own country may also promote national unity, pride and integration (Archer, 1978, Sindiga, 1996). This may be especially pertinent to island communities, which have finite and fragile landscapes vulnerable to environmental damage (Chaperon and Bramwell, 2013).

Moreover, domestic tourists have been suggested as providing more economic input to local communities, because they tend to use locally owned facilities, reducing leakage rates. For example, domestic tourists are more likely to use small businesses in different places, rather than be concentrated in a few major resorts, to avoid pre-paid packages, and purchase local products and services (Gossling *et al.*, 2005, Schmallegger *et al.*, 2011). This is important in light of the problems many small islands face of high leakage rates, often exacerbated by high levels of foreign ownership of mass tourism resources (Buhalis, 1999).

Finally, domestic tourism may be a means for destinations to reduce seasonality, and dependence on few originating markets, or declining markets (Sindiga, 1996). Moreover, Mykletun and Crotts (2001) note in Bornholm, Denmark, that whilst international arrivals spend more per head, they have far lower propensity to revisit, thus over time, their spending is lower as well as less reliable. This is noteworthy for the Isle of Man, where 40% of domestic (British Isles) visitors have been four times or more, 10% eleven or more (Isle of Man Tourism Survey 2004).

2.1 The Isle of Man

Located in the centre of the Irish Sea, British Isles, the Isle of Man has an area of 588km² and is home to circa 80,000 people, around a third of which live in the capital, Douglas (Isle of Man Digest of Statistics, 2010). The island is characterised by a distinctive culture informed by its geographical position, and independent tradition dating back to Celtic-Norse roots. Today the island remains a self-governing Crown Dependency of the UK. The island's natural landscape is equally varied, with a diversity of natural habitats ranging from upland heather moors and wooded glens, to coastal heath, agricultural plain, dunes and cliffs. Flora and fauna includes internationally significant rare bird populations, such as chough, curlew, and peregrine falcon (Hopson and Lamb, 1995).

From the 1890's to the 1960's, the Isle of Man was a major British domestic tourism destination. However, from the mid 1970's onwards, visitor arrivals began to fall, to levels around one third of past levels. Today, tourism is only the sixth biggest sector of the island economy, creating around 5% of GDP and 14% of jobs (Isle of Man Digest of Statistics 2010). The principle reason behind decline, as with other north European coastal resorts, has been described as the rise of cheap foreign travel (Walton, 2000).

3. METHODOLOGY

This article is based upon fieldwork in the Isle of Man conducted during a period of part time residency on the island from October 2010 – October 2013. This involved field trips to tourist attractions, participant observation of and with island tourists, literature reviews of government statistical data, local newspapers and local tourism literature. These were used to immerse within local culture, and to build a broad understanding of local tourism and the surrounding context embedded within. Subsequently 29 depth qualitative interviews were conducted with island residents in order to analyse local attitudes towards tourism. Interviews were live recorded and then transcribed within 72 hours by the researcher. Emergent patterns were categorised and analysed using traditional colour coding/copy and paste techniques.

The sampling process used a combination of purposive sampling and snowballing, with new interviewees recruited based on recommendations from other participants (as with Schmallegger *et al.*, 2011). Some network sampling occurred due to the nature of building contacts within a small island society. Creswell (2003) describes the risk of backyard sampling, whereby only similar opinions to one's own emerge due to tendency for commonality amongst group members, albeit Flick (2002) describes how personal contacts often feel uninhibited. Whilst it is accepted that this approach will have limitations in terms of its representativeness, for exploratory research such an approach remains valid and pragmatic advantages were felt to outweigh.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Identifying Domestic Tourism

Interviews demonstrated that there was considerable and distinguishable tourism activity by Isle of Man residents within island. All participants described taking tourist daytrips multiple times per year. A quarter of interviewees had also taken overnight stays in a variety of accommodations including holiday cottages, campsites, and hotels or B&B's.

Descriptions of touristic activities shared common elements which distinguished for interviewees from more general leisure pursuits. Tourist activities took place over longer periods of time for instance. They included a greater element of preparation associated with packing, planning and arranging. Combination of activities, such as walking, shopping and eating out, was the norm for a touristic daytrip, and hence illustrated why might take a prolonged period of time. *"It is nice to go down south with the grandchildren and make it a*

full day out. You can go to the castle, take them to see the trains... we always stop for an ice cream, even if it's raining." As such, tourist trips or stays seemed to imply a level of time commitment and associated planning, beyond the more routine or less special.

Tourist activities were also communal, with all respondents describing partaking with other people. This included partners, family and friends. Hosting visiting friends and relatives was commonly discussed and clearly an important motivator to pursue domestic tourism as a means of entertaining guests. *"I love having (family) over. It makes you go out and do things and you get a lot out of it yourself."* By contrast, two interviewees discussed how other outdoor activities considered as hobbies rather than tourism, tended to take less time and be solitary. Thus hiking might be a popular leisure pursuit, yet several hours doing just this would not be considered tourism.

Lastly, certain types of destinations visited also characterised and distinguished touristic activity according to participants. Attractions were important, particularly the beach, cultural-historic and natural sites. Castles, glens, the Laxey Wheel, museums and beaches were commonly highlighted. The coastal towns of Peel and Port Erin were popular destinations because of their perceived resort qualities. Both towns are centred on sandy beaches and have historic centres with small shops and cafes. Interviewees also appreciated the towns' holiday atmosphere. *"The Sound is really nice... I like that there are always a lot of people there enjoying the setting... It (the island) can get lonely; it's nice to share it with people."* *"Everyone seems to go to Peel don't they? There are always people out having a good time, having ice-creams. It is always busy, even in winter."* Such landscapes may therefore have more hedonic and social meanings to residents, than more utilitarian areas and facilities (Snepenger et al, 2007). Descriptions of small shops and cafes was distinguished from more general shopping activities, as a more unusual, exploratory activity for example.

4.2 Motivations for Domestic Tourism

A number of influences motivated participants to undertake domestic tourism. Social motivations were important. Described by a majority of participants was a need to entertain social groups or dependents, such as children or overseas guests. In turn, pursuit of social or romantic desires motivated many to take daytrips or stay overnight. And group hedonism was discussed by two participants who had stayed on the Calf of Man. *"Oh my God we all got so drunk... x and y got together and it was so funny. We had the best time."* *"It just like really brings you like together. Like, it is away from parents and everybody else, and so you can like really get to know each other."*

Escapism was important to all interviewees. *"You get tired of doing the same thing don't you?"* Regularly expressed was a desire to do something different, namely visiting somewhere unusual, and doing unusual things. These changes were usually modest, eating ice-cream on the seafront for instance, but were a break from the everyday and mundane. *"Sometimes I just think; 'oh why don't we have lunch in the campervan?' and so we might. It's just trying to have a little fun."* A need for social escapism in what can be close knit and homogenous small island communities, has been noted (Duffield and Long, 1982) and was likewise identified here. Several respondents discussed a sense of social claustrophobia and obligation in locales. *"You can't do anything without people knowing about it."* Hence travelling to a less frequented location, where one is unknown, could be particularly relaxing. *"It's so nice to go in the shops and just be able to browse... You can just space out. Here I am looking through the window to see if anyone I know is at the till."* Research henceforth concurs with extant literature on tourist motivations, notably the socio-psychological desire to escape from mundane environments, relax, enhance kinship relationships and facilitate social interaction (Crompton, 1979, 1981).

Related to the desire to do something different, was a desire to explore and learn more about island landscapes. For example, those staying on the Calf of Man detailed a desire to experience the wildlife and inaccessible landscapes of the island, in a way which relatively few people had. For campers, their activity gave them access to enjoy tranquillity, romance, isolation, and time to appreciate the natural beauty of their surroundings. *"You can get really close to the wildlife. There was this hen harrier just sat on a fence post about twenty feet away from my mum. I don't know if it's because they're not used to seeing people. It's really good if you are into that sort of thing; wildlife."*

The island's landscapes were talked about at diverse overall, and regionally flavoured. Furthermore, although a small island, interviewees discussed how travel times are restricted by small roads. Also illustrated by research was a localised sense of time and space. The Isle of Man might seem geographically small to an outsider, but for those resident it may not seem so. Conversations were of long periods without visiting entire regions because of how far away they seemed and how much effort would be involved. A forty minute car journey on the island can seem lengthy and off-putting. *"I haven't been to Castletown in about six years!"* *"It seems silly. When I first came here people said they only went to Port Erin once a year and I didn't believe them, but now I am like that too. It gets like it is a big effort."* As is commonly noted in anecdotes, a short flight might seem nothing to an Australian accustomed to vast landscapes. It appears the opposite is perhaps true for small islanders.

Thus participants spoke about landscape contrasts between north and south or east and west, heightened by infrequency of travel between and thus unfamiliarity with. *“Going down south for a holiday; it’s like going to a different country!” “It is surprisingly different down there... Like it doesn’t seem like it is the same island.” “The south feels much more touristy... well maybe it is just it feels like that to me because I’m coming from the north. Maybe they come to Ramsey and feel like they are on holiday!”* These contrasts enable a sense of differentiation from normal spaces and sense of routine and the mundane associated with. Archer (1978) suggests domestic tourists seek out novel spaces in this way. They satisfy definitions whereby domestic tourism involves travel outside of the normal place of residence to other areas within the country (Burkart and Medlik, 1981). They also facilitate feelings of exploration and gaining new knowledge about the island.

Therefore, although socio-psychological factors such as entertainment or escapism were the most commonly described motivation for domestic tourism, cultural factors such as discovery and increasing knowledge were found to exist as well. Crompton (1979) refers to this as where the emphasis is on the destination itself as a place of novelty, interaction and learning, rather than a function through which needs, such as escapism, can be satisfied. Both positive escapism; that concerned with learning and broadening minds, and negative escapism; seeking fun, pleasure, and getting away from responsibilities and stress (Fodness, 1994), were identified.

5. DISCUSSION

A unique contribution of this study is to raise awareness of the incidence of domestic tourism in a small island. Research found that limited size is not a barrier to significant touristic activity as evidenced by the high frequency of tourism daytrips and overnight stays amongst Isle of Man residents interviewed. Landscape variety, infrequency of travel, and a localised sense of travel times and expense, were identified. These enabled the motivations for escapism and exploration, which were found to underpin domestic tourism demand, to be fulfilled locally.

This findings is important because it highlights the existence of a potentially significant tourism niche that small islands may use as a source of industry support, yet until now overlooked. In the case of the Isle of Man, a stagnant tourism sector might benefit from the inputs of domestic tourists, helping to maintain the industry and important economic, social and environmental role it plays locally (see Canavan, 2013a; 2013b). Such inputs might be in terms of contributing to overall touristic atmosphere, stimulating exchanges between local and international tourism stakeholders, and financial gains.

Although direct questions were not asked, it appears to be the case that there is considerable associated economic input into the local economy as a result of domestic tourism on the Isle of Man. This input is through described spending on visiting attractions, transport use, shopping and eating out, as well as some accommodation spend. This type of tourist spend represents purely a recycling of money in the local economy, and does not address the foreign exchange gap import dependent small islands typically experience (Ayres, 2000). Yet it is an input which may help to maintain the overall viability of the Isle of Man tourism sector, which itself is an export industry. As Crouch and Ritchie (1999: 141) identify: “Foreign demand thrives more readily when domestic tourism is established”. Financial support, particularly out of season, and the contribution of domestic tourists to overall touristic atmosphere, may exemplify why (Canavan, 2013a).

5.1 Conclusion

Found to be widespread in the Isle of Man was domestic tourism activity found to be distinct from more general leisure pursuits in terms of being more time consuming, communal, and centred upon more unusual activities and attractions. Motivations of escapism and exploration were found. Such descriptions and motivations were related to the wider literature analysing and describing domestic tourism, and which have used similar criteria (i.e. Archer, 1978; Sindiga, 1996; Neto, 2003). This touristic activity was facilitated by local landscape diversity, limited transport infrastructure, and local sense of space. Together, these make domestic tourism activity possible in a confined space and therefore understandings of domestic tourism need to be open to such variety and nuance. This is particularly important in light of the potential benefits of local domestic tourism as a significant source of economic and other inputs.

Due to the small sample size involved, generalizability of the findings is limited. Moreover the lack of homogeneity between small islands may limit findings to a case by case basis (Milne, 1992). Further research is needed in comparable and contrasting small islands in order to better understand the extent of and conditions for such micro level domestic tourism. Quantitative research with larger samples would meanwhile help to better assess the scale and contribution of this type of tourism. The value of conducting such further research has been established in this article.

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